Data management in perspective: the career profile of clinical psychologists

The Research Information Network (RIN) and JISC were co-funders, in partnership with the Digital Curation Centre (DCC), of the Data Management Skills Support Initiative (DaMSSI), which supported five JISC research data management training projects*. These aimed to help researchers and their institutions to plan effectively the development of data management skills and training.

DaMSSI has drawn together a range of short career profiles to illustrate the relevance of data management skills to four graduate professions represented by the JISC training projects. These professions are: conservator; social science researcher; clinical psychologist and archaeologist. Each profile demonstrates how the value of data management skills learned alongside other research skills during graduate and postgraduate study contributes to and underpins high-quality professional performance. DaMSSI has also drawn up a career profile for describing the work of data managers, to help raise awareness about this emerging new profession.

This leaflet describes the third in the series of these profiles, covering the role of the clinical psychologist.

* Details of the 'RDMTrain' projects are available online at: www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/mrd/rdmtrain.aspx

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Studying to be a clinical psychologist

Entrants to the profession will begin their qualification with a first degree in psychology. To work in the role in the UK, this must be a degree accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS), and must be at least of 2:1 standard. Alternatively, candidates can sit a BPS exam, or undertake a BPS-approved conversion course. Trainees often undertake a Master's degree after six to twelve months of practical experience in the clinical environment; then, in order to qualify as a chartered psychologist, graduates must achieve a doctorate in clinical psychology.

What clinical psychologists do

Clinical psychology can be understood as the professional and applied branch of the discipline of psychology. Some of the common conditions treated by clinical psychologists include learning disabilities, anxiety, depression, trauma, behavioural problems, addictive behaviours, child and family problems and serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia.

Clinical psychologists aim to reduce psychological distress and improve psychological wellbeing by assessing and treating patients, supporting carers, undertaking research into psychological conditions, treatments and best practice, and training care staff and student clinical psychologists. They can also advise on related legal and policy matters.

These skills are applied in a wide variety of different care settings, such as health centres, hospitals, care homes, schools and universities, the prison service and private practice. Clinical psychologists work in an advisory role for some government departments, such as the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Health, and on parole boards. Some also balance clinical practice with research work. Research skills are an important part of successful performance in this profession. Aside from their obvious relevance to research experimentation and publication, clinical psychologists also need to be able to gather data about patients in a clinical setting in an accurate and well-documented way, record the decisions made about patient care, store this data securely and provide it in a controlled way to other members of the care team.

Daily duties and necessary skills

Much of the ability of the clinical psychologist to help a patient depends on accurate observation of the patient’s condition and circumstances, which allows the psychologist to develop a diagnosis and decide on appropriate treatment. This requires clinical experience, patience, determination, and the ability to make difficult decisions and work under pressure or in rapidly-changing circumstances. Experience of the design and delivery of evidence-based psychological assessments and therapies and the ability to understand various communication styles are also necessary.

The clinical psychologist works as part of a team caring for the patient, and so must have excellent verbal and written communication skills and the ability to understand and relay complex information to a range of individuals, such as other health professionals, family members and the patient themselves.

Clinical psychologists also often require leadership and management skills, the ability to multitask, and teaching or training skills.

Professional standards

The Health Professions Council (HPC) is the statutory regulator for practicing psychologists in the UK, and so many psychologists are required by employers to hold HPC registration. Several psychology-related professions, including ‘clinical psychologist’ are protected titles, and require HPC registration before an individual can legally use the title.1

1. www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/protectedtitles
The importance of good data management

Every decision which a clinical psychologist makes about a patient is based on an understanding of the patient’s condition, circumstances and history. This understanding is drawn from observation, psychometric testing, interviewing of the patient and contact with the patient’s guardians or carers. Every decision made can also have a fundamental and long-lasting impact on a patient’s life and so decision-making must be founded on high-quality research which is well-documented and able to withstand scrutiny.

Records about patients or service users, as information which may identify a living individual, must be stored and used in accordance with the 1998 Data Protection Act. Patient records are routinely kept as a mixture of paper and digital documents, which, owing to their sensitivity, must be managed securely in line with NHS recordkeeping guidelines and BPS guidance, as well as with consideration of research funder guidelines where applicable. Client confidentiality is an important aspect of the necessary trust relationship between patient and psychologist, and so such personal data must be handled appropriately and in a way agreeable to the individuals concerned. The psychologist must receive the patient’s explicit consent to obtain, keep and use personal data, as far as the patient is able to give this.

The BPS Code reinforces the importance of high quality data management and ethical research conduct with a number of statements. Primarily, the Code specifies that “[p]sychologists should … [r]ecord, process, and store confidential information in a fashion designed to avoid inadvertent disclosure” and that if client confidentiality must be breached for compelling reasons, the psychologist must “[d]ocument any breach of confidentiality and the reasons compelling disclosure without consent in a contemporaneous note.”

The British Psychological Society is the main professional association for clinical psychologists. Professionals in either academic or applied psychology can qualify for ‘chartered’ status, indicated by use of the suffix ‘CPsychol’. Trust is clearly an important part of the patient-psychologist relationship, and many professionals report that their chartered status helps engender confidence in patients as well as in other professionals. Chartered BPS members are required to adhere to the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct [see ‘Further reading’], and commit to continued professional development.

3. BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct, point 1.2, (iv)
4. BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct, point 1.2, (viii)
In addition, the Code addresses the issue of obtaining informed consent from patients and service users in some detail, including specifying the obligation to "[k]eep adequate records of when, how and from whom consent was obtained." In relation to disposal of records, the Code recommends that psychologists should "[c]omply with requests by clients who are withdrawing from research participation that any data by which they might be personally identified, including recordings, be destroyed."  

In addition, funders of research in the psychological sciences have their own requirements for data management, particularly of sensitive or patient-identifiable data. For example, the Medical Research Council (MRC) provides detailed guidance for the handling of personal information. Again, research ethics are an important element of this: principle 2 of the MRC guidance on handling personal information states, “All medical research using identifiable personal information, or using anonymised data from the NHS which is not already in the public domain, must be approved by a Research Ethics Committee ... or where appropriate, the Scottish Privacy Advisory Committee.”

Many clinical psychologists in the UK work in an NHS context, which has specified standards for information handling. Owing to the amount of data handled by the NHS which may identify patients or service users, the Department of Health has instituted a network of around 750 senior professionals known as 'Caldicott Guardians', named after the 1997 Caldicott recommendations on dealing with patient-identifiable information. The main role of the Guardians is to protect patient and service-user confidentiality, and those appointed to the role are responsible for “ensuring that the NHS, Councils with Social Services responsibilities and partner organisations satisfy the highest practicable standards for handling patient identifiable information.”

Maintenance of and contribution to sensitively-managed and securely-stored patient information underpins accurate and meaningful diagnosis and treatment of vulnerable individuals, and is fundamental to the trust relationship between patient or service user and clinical psychologist.

5. BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct, point 1.3, (iii)  
6. BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct, point 1.4, (iii)  
8. MRC Ethics Series: Personal Information in Medical Research, p9, point 2  